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Lighting of the Christmas Tree

In the Vassar Series of Plays
Edited by Gertrude Buck

Adapted by Josephine L. Palmer and Annie L.
Thorp, by permission of Messrs. Doubleday,
Page & Co., from "The Christmas Guest," by
Selma Lagerlof.

Samuel French: Publisher

28-30 West Thirty-eighth St. : New York

LONDON

Samuel French, Ltd.

26 SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND

PRICE THIRTY-FIVE CENTS

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no 1

THE VASSAR SERIES OF PLAYS

Every play in this series has been written by a member of the Play-Writing Class at Vassar College. But each play as printed is the product of a group-activity. Not merely an individual seated at a desk, but a community working together in a theater, is responsible for it in its final form.

Some of these plays have been "tried out" by the Vassar Dramatic Workshop and some by the Community Theatre of Poughkeepsie, New York. By the coöperative efforts of all who were associated in these enterprises—actors, committee workers and financial supporters—these plays have been given a sympathetic and intelligent production before audiences also intelligent and sympathetic, whose reaction has afforded the writers much valuable criticism. In the preliminary readings and rehearsals, also, occasional weak points which had escaped the ordeal of class criticism came to light and were strengthened by the author's revision. In fact, the plays as they appear in this series are literally a collaboration of the writers with innumerable friendly critics in the play-writing class, the cast and the audience. And it would be ungracious to put the fruits of this collaboration at the service of the public without grateful acknowledgment to all those who have in any way helped to establish and carry on the Vassar Dramatic Workshop or the Community Theatre of Poughkeepsie.

In recent years there has been an increasing de-

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mand for well-written, dramatically effective one-act plays, suitable for production by semi-professional companies or by amateur organizations of serious purpose and some degree of training. To aid in supplying this demand is the purpose of the Vassar Series of Plays. Other plays written by members of the Play-Writing Class at Vassar College may be secured in typewritten form by application to The Workshop Bureau of Plays, Vassar College.

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LIGHTING OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE

PRODUCING THE PLAY

The beautiful Swedish national costumes should be used for this play. Any good reference book on the costumes of various nations and many books about travel in Sweden will furnish illustrations that may be copied, varying the colors when necessary to produce a harmonious relation with one another. Since this is a modern play, only the servants, who are, of course, peasants, would be likely to wear these costumes on ordinary occasions, but members of the upper classes sometimes assume them for the festivities of the Christmas season. We may, therefore, take advantage of this possibility, to increase the picturesqueness of our play by using the colorful Swedish dress for all the characters.

A real Swedish interior, carefully reproduced from trustworthy illustrations, would also be effective. Not all the furniture found in any illustration should, of course, be used for the stage setting. A few pieces only should be chosen, with a view to composing without unnecessary "clutter" into a beautiful and characteristically Swedish whole.

The lines of this play are exceptionally simple in their phrasing and yet so full of meaning that no word or syllable should be lost by the audience. An intelligent, sympathetic rendering of each speech is especially important, but clear-cut enunciation and a beautiful quality of voice are also very desirable, particularly for Olga, Liljekrona and the two children.

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Olga is obviously the very heart of this play. She makes a charming picture with the little boys over the Christmas tree, the candle-lighting in the windows, and the story of the Christ-Child's wanderings. Her tender love for her home and her instinctive fear of any influence which may tend to lower its ideals or to draw Liljekrona away from it, must be so clearly brought out in the acting (as it is in the lines) that the audience will understand and even partially sympathize with her anxiety to be rid of the drunken vagrant, Ruster.

This anxiety is sharpened by the approach of the Christmas season, which she feels should be celebrated as a beautiful home festival, just by themselves. But even as Olga carries her point and Ruster is about to leave the house, she is assailed by remorse for the selfish impulse to protect her home at the unfortunate old man's expense. This should be clearly indicated in the tone and manner with which she asks Liljekrona to give Ruster something extra for Christmas and to lend him his fur coat.

The departure of Ruster ends the first stage of the play's action, in which Olga has attempted to secure happiness for herself and her household by the refusal of her hospitality to some one in sore need of it. Ruster had seemed to her a discordant element when present, but his absence seems to bring ten-fold more unhappiness. All the Christmas preparations go wrong. Sigurd's cookie-dough figure of the Christ-Child "doesn't look like anything," the E string of Liljekrona's fiddle has snapped and he has no new one, Torstein has gone to drive Ruster and they cannot dance without him, the sheaves for the sparrows have been forgotten, and finally Liljekrona withdraws to his own room to play the stormy music which Olga understands as a portent of his return to the old life of wandering.

In this section of the play, Liljekrona controls the action and should dominate the scene. Olga attempts, in vain, to infuse joy into the Christmas observances. Liljekrona's bitterly self-reproachful speech about the lonely and the hungry people,—“When they pass so close as to touch our sleeve,—we do not see them, we do not stop them, but let them plod their path alone,”—shows that he will no longer deceive himself as to the heartlessness of their own action. And when he says—“Your candles are too late. The door is closed. The voice is gone,”—Olga sees that on the eve of Christmas and in the name of its fitting observance, she has betrayed its very spirit of hospitality and kindness.

The sound of the music from Liljekrona's room, full of the old, wild passion for the open road, brings to Olga realization of the price she must pay for this mistake, “if God does not work a miracle in the night.” Her intense suffering at this point marks the crucial moment in the play and must be conveyed by action and facial expression as well as by a poignant rendering of the lines. The moment must be held perceptibly, after she sinks into her chair, until the sound of sleighbells, at first far off and gradually approaching, breaks the spell.

The bells usher in the third stage of the action, which is markedly different in feeling-tone from the other two. Instead of the fear and the cloaked unkindness of the first scene and the growing self-reproach of the second, we have the exaltation of complete surrender to generous impulse. Olga's joy in the “miracle” which she so little deserved or expected must shine from her face and from every word and action, as soon as she realizes that Ruster has indeed returned and she has a chance to repair the wrong she has done. Her inspiration to ask Ruster to look after the children while she is out of the room should be so acted as to show that there is

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something behind her simple request. She will prove her gratitude for this chance to atone, by trusting her dearest treasures to the man she had feared to have remain in the house with them.

The scene of the children with Ruster gives the actor an opportunity to show the battered, dissipated old man, afraid of the innocent eyes of the children, but gradually put at his ease by their complete unconsciousness and their real interest in the one thing he knows,—flute-playing. Ruster's complete collapse when the children's absorption in reading allows him to realize his own desolate situation, and Olga's offer to make him their tutor, need only be played with entire simplicity and sincerity by both actors, to bring tears to the eyes of many people in the audience.

Olga's explanation to Liljekrona of her plans for Ruster and why she is taking this great risk, bring her once more into a position of leadership. This is emphasized by the action, as first Liljekrona, then the children and finally Ruster, kiss Olga's hand, while her curtain speech to Ruster gives the needed touch of humility and graciousness to her exaltation.

The curtain should be raised quickly after it has been lowered, so as to make the tableau of the lighting of the tree seem, as it is, an essential part of the play.

GERTRUDE BUCK.

CHARACTERS

LITTLE RUSTER: a flute-player.

LILJEKRONA: a violinist, host of Lofdala.

OLGA: his wife.

OSWALD }
SIGURD } his little sons.

HALLA: the cook.

TORSTEIN: the man-servant.

First produced by the Vassar Dramatic Workshop, December 16, 1916.

THE LIGHTING OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE

SCENE: *The living-room of LOFDALA, a Swedish manor house. It is the afternoon before Christmas and the room has an atmosphere of comfort and warmth; outside it is snowing. To the left is a large Swedish fireplace, with its hanging black chimney-hood, crane and shining kettles. A high wooden bench, a table and armchair are drawn close to the fire. A heavy, iron-hinged door opens outdoors at the center back. On either side are windows. At the left a door leads into the kitchen, and at the right a flight of stairs leads to the bedrooms. By the stairs stands a Christmas tree as yet unlighted. There is a music cabinet against the back wall, left; and an oblong table at the right; a carved wooden chest stands beside the fireplace.*

TIME: about 1890.

OLGA is discovered arranging candles on the tree. She is slender and moderately tall, with large eyes and rich dark hair braided about her head. She wears Swedish holiday dress.

(Enter OSWALD and SIGURD, running downstairs with their hands full of cotton. They are six and four years old, OSWALD being a little the taller. They are bright-faced, tow-headed little

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boys, and are dressed in their embroidered holiday suits. OSWALD stops halfway down, and leaning over the banisters drops bits of cotton on the tree.)

OSWALD. See, Mother, it's snowing.

SIGURD. Look, Mother—it's snowing. *(Turns at the foot of the stairs and runs back to OSWALD.)*

OSWALD. Don't make such big flakes, Sigurd.

SIGURD. But I'm making it snow hard.

OSWALD. Oh, look, that fell on a candle.

OLGA. We need some more snow over here. Come down and make it snow on these branches.

OSWALD. But, Mother, we need some most on this side—like this.

SIGURD. Where is Father?

OLGA. He has gone out with Torstein in the sledge to gather green boughs to make the house look like Christmas.

SIGURD. It'll soon be Christmas, Mother. When can we light the candles?

OLGA. When Father comes home. Have we used up all the snow, Oswald?

OSWALD. Yes, I will get some more. *(Starts upstairs.)* Oh! *(Draws back as he discovers RUSTER, who has just entered and is standing on the landing. He is unkempt and his shabby, black coat is buttoned up to his chin. His eyes are small and blurred and his dark hair stands out like a cloud about his head. But he is not wholly unattractive. His features are well-formed and his black mustache is twirled at a proud angle. He carries his music pen and manuscript. His voice is cracked and harsh.)*

OLGA. *(Looking up)* Why, Ruster!

RUSTER. *(Shivering)* I thought you might be having punch. My bones are frozen working up in

that cold room. It would take a taste of hell-fire to warm me up. (*Drinking from his flask.*)

OLGA. (*Turning toward the boys—raising her hand as if to silence RUSTER*) The punch has not been made yet, Ruster. Children, have you forgotten your Christmas cookies? Halla will help you make them if you run out to her.

OSWALD. Oh, I know what I want to make.

SIGURD. What, Oswald?—What?

OSWALD. I want a raisin in mine. (*Pushing open the door.*) Can I, Halla?

(*Exeunt to kitchen. OLGA crosses to RUSTER.*)

OLGA. If you are cold, Ruster, why not stay here by the fire and copy your music? Is there much more to do?

RUSTER. (*Seating himself and arranging pages*) Liljekrona says there is no hurry. When will he be home?

OLGA. As soon as he has filled the sledge with boughs, for he knows we need him here on Christmas Eve. (*She goes to the window. Sleighbells are heard.*) There they are, coming up the drive. We must have some place to put the branches. (*She spreads a cloth on the floor. RUSTER steals a drink from his flask. The door opens. Enter LILJEKRONA. He is a tall, finely erect man, clad in a heavy fur coat that is covered with snow. As he takes off his cap, he discloses a mass of light hair brushed back from an unusually high forehead. His face is at once sensitive and strong. He carries a load of boughs.*) Well, what an armful you have!

LILJEKRONA. (*Gaily*) Tell the children I have brought home the whole forest for our Christmas.

OLGA. Put down your forest over here. Was it very cold?

LILJEKRONA. There has been a fine flurry all

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morning. (*OLGA helps him off with his coat.*) But the fire feels good!

RUSTER. This is the warmest place in the house.

LILJEKRONA. How is it going? (*Looking over RUSTER's shoulder.*) You haven't forgotten how a page ought to look, have you, Ruster?

RUSTER. No, I can copy, but I cannot play. I have almost forgotten the sound of my flute. Nobody wants a flute-player nowadays! They do not care for music any more in Varmland and they do not want to learn.

LILJEKRONA. Yes, Varmland is not like Ekeby when we knew it.

RUSTER. It's a pity we ever left there, Liljekrona! We have never had such playing since—you with your violin and I with my flute. Old Torwaldson waving his angry stick! By Heaven, he called the souls out of us!

LILJEKRONA. Yes, the violins sobbing—then the horns, the winds, the basses—each breaking over the other in thundering waves.

RUSTER. Holy Mother!—that was living!

LILJEKRONA. And from one patron off on the road to another, and along the way, what gay evenings in the tent and at the inn when a man was free from care!

RUSTER. How you could play then! Shall I forget that night in Olaf's garden? You made your fiddle sing as though your heart were in tune with its strings. But now, Christ's blood! you never play like that.

OLGA. He plays more beautifully now than he ever did at Ekeby.

LILJEKRONA. No, there is not so much time for practice here.

RUSTER. And the old spirit has gone out of you.

LILJEKRONA. I sometimes think so myself. It is hard to settle down after a life of wandering.

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Something wild keeps crying in my soul, bidding me be off again.

OLGA. Why is not home the place for music, Liljekrona? Surely those who love you most care most to hear. Must you seek your inspiration from strangers?

LILJEKRONA. No, Olga, you are more to me than a world of strangers. It is you alone who hold me here.

RUSTER. Yes—you have a warm fire and a full cellar to keep you at home. (LILJEKRONA *shrugs and turns away impatiently.*) But what about the man who has not money enough to fill his flask? (*Bitterly.*) My horse, and carriage, and fur coat—they're all gone! (*Drinks, then laughs boisterously.*) But still I have friends—lots of friends in Varmland, and they're always glad to see me and give me a cup of cheer! (*He drains his flask and wipes his mustache with the back of his hand.* LILJEKRONA *risks disgustedly and crosses the room.*)

OLGA. (*Pointedly*) Have you more copying to do still, Ruster?

RUSTER. (*Blinking at her*) The "Folksong" is almost finished. I was thinking, Liljekrona—that when that is done, there are two others you showed me yesterday, that would go well with this.

LILJEKRONA. It is better alone.

RUSTER. But those two shepherd songs. I took the book to my room. Wait till I bring it down. (*He rises unsteadily. Exit.*)

OLGA. (*Going to LILJEKRONA*) Liljekrona, don't give him more copying, or we shall be obliged to keep him over Christmas.

LILJEKRONA. He must be somewhere.

OLGA. Our Christmas is spoiled if he stays. He is so dirty and he drinks so. And think how bad it is for the children.

LILJEKRONA. But he is an old friend.

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OLGA. Yet on Christmas Eve—we have kept thinking how happy we should be, telling stories and dancing about the tree. And you would play our favorite tunes. (*She looks wistfully about the partly decorated room.*) But now all the pleasure is gone if Ruster stays!

LILJEKRONA. Formerly you were glad to see him.

OLGA. Yes—we all were. But not since he has become a drunkard. And, Liljekrona, I am afraid——

LILJEKRONA. Afraid of what, dear?

OLGA. (*Impetuously*) Let him go somewhere else for Christmas.

LILJEKRONA. How can we send him away? It would be inhospitable. Nobody wants him any more than we do.

OLGA. But the children, Liljekrona.

(*Enter RUSTER with book.*)

RUSTER. Here it is. (*Handing book to LILJEKRONA.*)

LILJEKRONA. Yes, I remember.

RUSTER. Shall I copy them?

LILJEKRONA. No—I can play these from the book.

RUSTER. This is a poor transcription. It should be written in D instead of F.

LILJEKRONA. Well, I can transpose it.

RUSTER. I have not copied the words for the "Folksong." Do you want it done?

LILJEKRONA. No, it will do as it is.

RUSTER. Well then, it is finished. (*Half-heartedly.*) I suppose I must be going. (*Glances toward the window.*)

LILJEKRONA. (*Indifferently*) You had better stay where you are over Christmas.

RUSTER. (*Catching the note in LILJEKRONA'S*

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voice, and with indignant pride.) What do you mean, Liljekrona, shall I stay here because I have nowhere else to go? Why, only think how they are standing and waiting for me in the big iron-works in the parish of Bro. The guest-room will be already in order and the glass of welcome filled. I must hurry. I only do not know to whom I should go first.

LILJEKRONA. Very well, you may go if you will.

RUSTER. (*Emphatically*) Yes, I must go—at once.

(*Enter TORSTEIN with logs for the fire.*)

OLGA. If you wish, Torstein will drive you down. Are the horses still harnessed, Torstein?

TORSTEIN. Yes, Ma'am.

OLGA. Then bring the sledge around.

RUSTER. And bring it at once. I have only to get my treasures and I am ready. (*Picks up his music pen and exit upstairs.*)

TORSTEIN. He's not going to stay over Christmas?

OLGA. You must hurry back, Torstein. The snow is getting deep.

(*Exit TORSTEIN. LILJEKRONA looks over the music sheets on table, and takes money from his pocket.*)

OLGA. You will slip in something for Christmas?

LILJEKRONA. Of course.

OLGA. (*Taking down fur coat and warming it*) Will you lend him your big coat? Torstein can bring it back. (*After a pause.*) As long as he wishes to go himself, it is as well to let him.

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(Enter RUSTER with his belongings tied up in a blue-striped cotton handkerchief, and his flute under his arm.)

LILJEKRONA. (*Meeting him and giving him what he has earned*) That is always poor payment for art, Ruster, but it may serve you, somehow.

RUSTER. (*Dazedly*) Yes.

OLGA. Will you put on this coat, Ruster? (*Helping him into coat.*) You must keep warm, and watch that your hands and face are well covered. And tell Torstein where to take you in Bro.

RUSTER. (*Shaking himself together and going toward door*) I'll be there in time for a glass of punch and the Christmas tree at Erickson's—or Oscar's—or——

(LILJEKRONA opens the door for him and he goes out slowly.)

OLGA. (*Calling after him*) A happy Christmas to you!

LILJEKRONA. (*Faintly*) Good luck, Ruster.

RUSTER. (*Dully, from without*) Good-bye.

(LILJEKRONA closes the door and they look out the window until the sleighbells jingle off. OLGA turns back to the room.)

OLGA. Now as soon as the boughs are up, we shall be ready for our Christmas tree. Don't you think some holly would be nice for the table, Liljekrona? (*As LILJEKRONA does not answer, she stoops and picks up sprigs of holly from the pile of branches, then goes to the kitchen door and calls.*) Children, what are you doing? Come and bring your play in here. (*She arranges the holly in a brass bowl on the long table. LILJEKRONA begins to put the boughs up over the door.*)

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(Enter OSWALD, carrying with great care a board with some dough on it, and SIGURD running ahead with his fingers covered with dough.)

SIGURD. (*Running to LILJEKRONA*) Father! See my fat dough fingers.

LILJEKRONA. What are you making, Sigurd?

OSWALD. Christmas things for Halla to bake.

SIGURD. Then they will be brown and we can eat them just like the round cookies. See, Mother.

OSWALD. Only these aren't round cookies, Mother. (*Sits down on the floor with the dough.*)

SIGURD. No. There is a Christmas tree.

OSWALD. And I made a star.

SIGURD. And I'm going to make—— (*Runs and whispers to his mother.*)

OLGA. A what, dear?

OSWALD. (*Looking up from the floor*) A little Christ-Child we're going to make.

SIGURD. A little bit of a baby Christ-Child.

OLGA. (*Kissing his forehead*) That will be a lovely Christmas task.

OSWALD. (*Getting up and pulling at LILJEKRONA, who yields*) Look, Father! Look at my cookie! To-night I'll eat it for supper.

LILJEKRONA. Yes. (*Pause.*) I wonder how many little boys will be eating their Christmas cookies to-night, and how many will be without a bite of Christmas dinner, hungry and cold.

OSWALD. Won't they have any Christmas dinner, Father?

LILJEKRONA. Some won't. (*He turns back and continues to put up boughs.*)

SIGURD. Why won't those little boys have any Christmas dinner, Mother?

OLGA. Father meant, dear, that some children are too poor to buy any.

OSWALD. Where are the poor children?

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OLGA. I'm afraid there are some in every village, Oswald.

SIGURD. In our valley, Mother?

OLGA. Yes, dear, I'm afraid there are.

OSWALD. Then, Mother, if Sigurd and I made some good cookies, could we take them down to those poor children?

OLGA. If only we knew just where we could find them, Oswald. It is hard sometimes to know where the lonely people are, and the hungry ones.

LILJEKRONA. And when they pass so close as to touch our sleeve on the way we do not see them, we do not stop them, but let them plod their path alone.

OLGA. (*Stung by LILJEKRONA's remark*) It is a good thought, Oswald. Take them out to Halla now, so she can bake them before to-morrow.

SIGURD. I can't make a Christ-Child, Mother. (*With a sob.*) It doesn't look like *anything*.

OSWALD. (*With a laugh*) It looks like a star.

OLGA. (*Rising*) Let me see, dear. I think Mother would know what that was. Take it to Halla and she will bake it. Then wash those sticky hands. It is time to light the tree. (*Exeunt OSWALD and SIGURD. Takes violin from the cabinet and gives it to LILJEKRONA.*) You will play for us to dance?—one of the old polkas, Liljekrona.

LILJEKRONA. (*Pettishly*) My E string has snapped.

OLGA. Well, put on a new one. Quick, before the children come back.

(*LILJEKRONA goes slowly upstairs with his violin.*)

OLGA *pulls out the tree from the corner and starts to light the candles with a taper. Enter HALLA with a punch bowl and the glasses, which she places on the long table. OSWALD and SIGURD follow, each carrying a plate of cakes.*)

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OSWALD. Mother! Are you lighting the tree instead of Father?

OLGA. Yes. Do you want to help?

OSWALD. Oh, yes.

SIGURD. And I want to, too.

OLGA. You shall, dear. But first put the cakes on the table. (*OSWALD and SIGURD deposit their cakes and run to the tree. OLGA gives her taper to SIGURD.*) Here, Sigurd, first the low ones—there. (*Lighting another taper.*) Now, Oswald. Can you do it, dear?

OSWALD. You light those, Mother. (*Pointing to higher ones.*)

OLGA. There.

SIGURD. The top one of all isn't lit, Mother.

OLGA. No, Father is the only one who can reach that. We'll have to leave it. Come, Halla.

(*Enter LILJEKRONA by the stairs without his violin.*)

OLGA. We're all ready for a polka.

LILJEKRONA. I have no new string for my fiddle.

OLGA. But you *can* play on three strings.

LILJEKRONA. I can remember no polkas.

OLGA. (*Approaching him persuasively*) Why, Liljekrona, can't you play anything? Sha'n't we be able to dance at all?

LILJEKRONA. Torstein is not back yet. He is the best dancer of all. Perhaps it was hard to find the house. (*Goes to the window.*)

OLGA. Well then, we'll wait our dancing for Torstein, and have our punch and cakes while they are hot.

LILJEKRONA. The sparrows are twittering about the window sill most miserably. Where is the pole with the sheaves for them?

OLGA. I did not think of it till now. Did you remember, Halla?

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HALLA. No, I didn't. Poor little things!

LILJEKRONA. How is it that you forgot on this day, of all days? Do old customs mean nothing to you? Or is it the heartlessness of those who shut their eyes to the meaning of old beliefs? At Ekeby no one ever forgot!

OLGA. (*Disturbed*) No, my dear, we are not heartless. The sheaves shall be put out as soon as Torstein returns. Come, shall we have our punch and cakes? Children, are you hungry?

OSWALD. I am.

SIGURD. I want a cookie from my plate.

LILJEKRONA. And there are no candles in the windows. Nothing is done as it used to be. (*He seats himself on the wooden bench.*)

OLGA. Oh, why—why, I had intended to light the candles. (*Goes to mantel.*) Come, children, before you have your cookies will you help Mother? (*She takes from the shelf above the fireplace two wooden frames, in each of which is set a row of candles. She lights them and gives one to each of the boys.*) Careful. Put them on the windowsills.

OSWALD. I want mine in this window. You put yours over there, Sigurd.

OLGA. Halla, take the punch to the table by the fire. (*OLGA seats herself near LILJEKRONA.*) Come, children. (*OSWALD and SIGURD come to her side.*) Sigurd, do you know why we put candles in the windows on Christmas Eve?

OSWALD. So that people can see where we live!

OLGA. Yes—dear; and there is a story that the little Christ-Child goes about on Christmas Eve looking for a welcome. (*She pours some punch for LILJEKRONA, who is looking intently at her.*)

SIGURD. And if he sees our lights, Mother, will he come to our house?

OLGA. Yes, dear, and when you hear him say:

"Behold I stand at the door and knock——" (*She passes glass of punch to LILJEKRONA.*)

LILJEKRONA. (*Ignoring it, and meeting her glance with a steady gaze*) "And if any man hear my voice and will open the door, I will come in and sup with him, and he with me." Your candles are too late. The door is closed. The voice is gone. (*Rises and exits slowly to his room.*)

OSWALD. (*After a pause*) Why did Father go away, Mother?

HALLA. Is it anything the matter with the punch, Ma'am?

OLGA. (*Hesitating*) No, Halla, it's not the punch—I think he's not—very happy——

SIGURD. Won't he come back, Mother? Who will tell us stories?

(*Wild music is heard from LILJEKRONA'S room. It rises and falls in passionate rushes and casts a spell over those who listen.*)

OLGA. (*Rising suddenly at the sound*) He is playing. Why—he has not played like that since he came home. It is his great heart full of revolt from all that is small about us. "You thought to bind me," he is saying, "you thought to make me as small-minded as yourselves." Oh, I was wrong! I thought to shut out unhappiness, but with it I have shut out love. To-morrow he will be gone, if God does not work a miracle in the night. (*She sinks into her chair and covers her face with her hands. The boys sit quite still and look with awe at their mother. HALLA wrings her hands in a half-understanding and miserable way.*)

(*Sleighbells are heard. HALLA goes to the window.*)

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HALLA. It must be Torstein come back again at last. No, there are two of them. And yet that's Torstein. He's getting out. He's helping the other. *(In a tone of horror.)* Why, it must be Ruster with him!

OLGA. *(Until now heedless, looking and drying her eyes)* Ruster, did you say, Halla? Has Ruster come back again? *(She approaches the window and looks out.)* Surely it is he! *(She opens the door. The two men enter. They are covered with snow. TORSTEIN is blue with the cold, and RUSTER seems half-frozen. His mustache hangs down over his mouth. He leans on TORSTEIN. The children jump up from the floor.)* Ruster, you are welcome back to Lofdala. *(She loosens his coat and leads him, with TORSTEIN's help, to the fire. HALLA draws up the armchair into which RUSTER sinks weakly. The children watch.)*

TORSTEIN. *(Apologetically)* I had to bring him back, Ma'am. At every house they were either going away over Christmas, or were crowded with company. They didn't even ask him to get out of the sledge. And the snow was so thick I thought we'd both be frozen.

OLGA. You did well to bring him, Torstein. *(She rubs RUSTER's hands to give them life. TORSTEIN stands by the fire.)* Halla, is the punch still hot?

HALLA. Yes, Ma'am.

OLGA. Then pour out a glass. It will warm him.

(HALLA pours out two glasses. One she gives to TORSTEIN, the other OLGA holds to RUSTER's lips.)

TORSTEIN. *(Smacking his lips)* Um! That puts life into you! *(Sets down his glass.)* Well, I must

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drive the horses around, or they'll be drifted in.

(Exit by front door. OSWALD and SIGURD watch from the window.)

RUSTER. *(Gaining consciousness and looking about with a sad, puzzled expression)* How did I come here again? It is strange, all strange to be in Liljekrona's house—I thought—— *(Abruptly.)* Why are you so kind to me? I am only an old broken-down instrument . . .

OLGA. We are glad to see you, Ruster! And I want you to think—you have never been away. Let me have your wet coat. *(Helps him out of it.)* Halla will dry it in the kitchen.

(Exit HALLA with coat.)

OLGA. *(Refilling his glass and putting it on the table by him)* Are you warmer now?

RUSTER. Yes—quite warm, thank you.

OSWALD. *(Offering the cookie he has been holding)* Here's a cookie. *(SIGURD, who is about to eat the last fragment of his, stops and holds it out to RUSTER.)*

RUSTER. *(Starting up suddenly)* I can't stay here! I am of no use—here—or anywhere!

OLGA. *(Putting a hand on his arm)* You are mistaken, Ruster. You may help, if you will. I must attend to setting the table for dinner and the children will be quite forsaken. Will you look after them a little?

RUSTER. *(Rising, alarmed)* I can't do that!—Why, I—they——

(Exit OLGA, resolutely. RUSTER looks after her, then turns, and seeing his glass of punch on the table, starts to pick it up. He encounters the

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steady gaze of the children, restrains himself and fumbles in his pocket. He draws out his flute and blows a note on it. The boys come closer.)

OSWALD. How do you do that? (RUSTER *does not answer, but blows again.*)

SIGURD. Why do you lift your fingers?

RUSTER. To make the notes.

SIGURD. Let me try! (RUSTER *places his little fingers over two of the stops. SIGURD blows, but no sound comes. OSWALD laughs.*)

OSWALD. Let me try! (RUSTER *shows him also—but still no tone.*) How do you do it? (He *tries again.*)

RUSTER. I blow in here. (Showing them.) And I keep the holes covered with my fingers. When I want to make a note, I lift up a finger, like this. (He *blows.*)

SIGURD. Blow another.

RUSTER. (Blows another. Then both over again) This is A and this is B.

OSWALD. A and B. You can't play *them*. They're letters.

RUSTER. Yes, and in music they are the names of the notes. (Takes out a score and with a crayon makes a few notes.) This is the way they look.

SIGURD. Let me see.

OSWALD. No! That's not right! That's not what's in our storybook! See—I'll show you. (He runs to music cabinet, and from lower cupboard pulls out a battered cloth book.)

RUSTER. (To SIGURD) Can this boy spell his name?

SIGURD. Yes—S I G U R D !

OSWALD. See—look at *our* book. There isn't any A and B like that! That is A and that is B. (Pointing.)

LIGHTING OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE 27

RUSTER. Can you read that?

OSWALD. Yes, I can read it.

(Enter OLGA with tablecloth, glasses and silver. She smiles at the group and quietly begins to arrange the table.)

OSWALD. *(Reading)* "Far away, in the deep forest there once grew——"

BOTH CHILDREN. "A pretty Fir-Tree. The sun shone full upon him, the breeze played freely around him, and in the n—n——" *(Looking up questioningly at RUSTER.)*

RUSTER. "Neigh-bor-hood."

OSWALD. "Neighborhood grew many Fir-Trees."

BOTH CHILDREN. "Some older, some younger."

OSWALD. *(Turning from the book)* Look—I'll draw you a fir-tree. *(He draws on RUSTER's music score—spreading it on the floor.)*

SIGURD. *(Slowly)* "But the little Fir-Tree was not happy; he was always long—longing to be tall; he th—th——"

(RUSTER, who during the last part of the reading has been paying no attention, suddenly covers his face with his hands. His shoulders shake a little. SIGURD looks up frightened. OLGA crosses quickly to him.)

OLGA. *(Gently)* Ruster—Ruster! Don't feel badly!

RUSTER. *(Sobbing softly)* Yes—I am of no use any more.

OLGA. *(Sympathetically)* I know—I know. You cannot make a living by your music and you are destroying yourself with brandy. You have been turned away from every door where you have knocked. But, Ruster——

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RUSTER. Yes, I am worn out. I ought to be thrown away! Nobody needs me.

OLGA. But don't you see that to be with the children, as to-night, would be something for you? If you would teach children you would be welcomed everywhere. Look at them, Ruster! (*She places the boys in front of him.*) Look at them!

RUSTER. (*Blinking*) I dare not!

OLGA. (*Laughing joyously*) Then you must accustom yourself to them, Ruster! Perhaps you could help them with their reading. They need a schoolmaster! (*Turning to children triumphantly.*) How would you like that, children?

(*Enter LILJEKRONA, violin under his arm. RUSTER remains motionless by the fireplace with bowed head.*)

LILJEKRONA. Why are you laughing, Olga, what is it?

OLGA. Nothing—but that Ruster has come again!

LILJEKRONA. (*Perplexed*) Ruster here again?

OLGA. (*Beaming*) Yes, and he is going to stay with us to teach our little boys.

LILJEKRONA. Ruster! (*With amazement*) You have asked him to teach——?

OLGA. Yes, Oswald and Sigurd. He has been helping them this afternoon.

LILJEKRONA. But—has he promised to give up——?

OLGA. He has promised nothing. But there is much about which he must be careful when he has to look little children in the eyes every day.

LILJEKRONA. You're sure he can do it?

OLGA. (*Not heeding*) If it had not been Christmas, perhaps I should not have ventured; but if our Lord dared to place His own son among us sinners,

LIGHTING OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE 29

surely we can dare to let our children try to save a human soul.

(LILJEKRONA's face twitches and twists. He gently kisses his wife's hand as if asking forgiveness.)

LILJEKRONA. The children must come and kiss their Mother's hand! (*They do so, though not just knowing why.*)

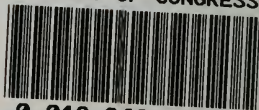
OLGA. (*Going to RUSTER and holding out her hand*) Ruster, it is you who have made our Christmas happy. (*He kisses her hand.*)

CURTAIN

(*The lifted curtain reveals the whole family gathered about the tree, HALLA, TORSTEIN and all, while LILJEKRONA lights the topmost candle.*)

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